

Everyday Astrophysics

By Linda Parker Horowitz

Since my brain goes from topic to topic at warp speed, and I seek out distractions like a magnet near iron, I became a library connoisseur, seeking quiet places for study and work. I developed and honed my biblio-expertise while in Cornell's MBA program, parking myself at various times in all of that esteemed educational institution's 16 libraries, depending on my mood and the ambiance it offered. I could eat and drink coffee in the Agriculture School's library. If I needed to hide in a dark basement and study undisturbed, the physics library was the place, open 7 days a week until midnight.

With the California budget cuts, there aren't many libraries open. Desperate to find a place away I could concentrate, I discovered the CalTech astrophysics library housed in sparkling Cahill Hall, with its myriad of odd angels both exterior and in, stairs lit by embedded LED lights, and a large wall at the entrance covered entirely by a photograph of a gorgeous galaxy. There may be several universes as yet to be named in that mural, I can't tell. I have a hard time just managing the one I'm in, much less exploring another.

I've always admired engineers and scientists for their expertise in arenas that are completely outside of my innate abilities and as a result, totally incomprehensible to me. Every time I drive the freeway interchange that heads toward LAX, I can see the highway curve a mile above the ground, flying west toward the ocean. I am compelled to break into song, "Meet George Jetson." I'm in the future!

The first day my son went to kindergarten, his school hosted a parent coffee, no doubt so we could have a group hug and cry silently together. Surprisingly, I met several of the dads and introduced myself.

"Hello. I'm Linda Horowitz. My son, Mitchell, just started kindergarten."

"Nice to meet you," replied the tall slender dad in a Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts. "I'm Steven Rosenberg."

"Great to meet you," I smiled.

Curious that a father was there, I queried, "What do you do for work, Steven?"

"I'm a NASA deep space scientist," he replied casually, as if everyone is a real rocket scientist.

I swallowed -- perceptibly, no doubt, and forced a smile. "Ah huh. Yea. Well, that's interesting," was as much as I could choke-out. I was clueless how to follow-up. I didn't even have another *thought* on that topic.

"I do brochures," I said, shaking his hand and thinking, "I feel soooooo inadequate in the face of the velocity required to launch multi-million dollar spacecraft and time slowing. Please, God. Hurry time and make the bell ring soon!"





This tiny CalTech library is not an “old school,” dark place, with the classic musty smell of old books and wood, similar to many of the libraries I know and love. This is very high tech, with floor-to-ceiling glass walls overlooking the patio. Incredibly, it is generally unoccupied. Every now and then a true science geek appears, seemingly from through the walls like an apparition. He will plop into one of the huge, comfy chairs, flip-open his laptop, and put buds in his ears. It is strangely and wonderfully silent. There is a nearby bathroom and even a mini-kitchen – my new home.

One morning, a group of scientific folks came in to discuss a journal projected on the large screen that magically dropped from the ceiling before me. I had no trouble focusing on my work since I they were speaking some foreign language; “Alien,” I suspect. They may have been referencing the colored squiggles on the screen or planning an invasion. I’m not sure; I’ve never heard that language.

So here I sit, with a wall of neatly arranged volumes staring down at me as I work on a consulting black hole. As I ponder how to emerge from this vortex, *I’ll share few cosmic corrections:*

- I see a book entitled, "Einstein's Enigmas." Who knew he had bowel problems?
- I don't need to read "Wandering Stars" when there's *People Magazine*. And anyway, this is L.A. Look around.
- “Pulsars.” I’ve been married a long time and fear I might never know those places again.
- Dark Matter is easy to find. Just look in my oven.
- “Relativistic Astrophysics.” Let’s leave my neurotic family out of this. The universe has enough problems.
- “Cosmology is Important.” I need to find a good cosmologist to work on my wrinkles.
- The “Dusty Universe” is on top of my refrigerator. Who cares? I’m short and can’t see it anyway.
- There is no need for “Gravitational N-Body Simulations.” I have empirical evidence that after 40, thighs and breasts drop at an alarming rate.
- “Quantum Physics” explains the amount of energy required to clean my house with 3 boys, 2 cats, 1 dog, and a lizard living in it.
- “Solar Granulation.” I do not like to cook, particularly in the sun.
- Isn’t Cosmochemistry that trendy bar on Sunset?

I didn't realize this library had *those* books. I'll have to surreptitiously slip the volume entitled, "Positional Astrophysics," off the shelf and quickly look at the pictures to see if there's one I don't know.